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Introduction

Religion is often portrayed as a source of conflict; its role in the overall peace process has all too often been overlooked. There are many other dimensions and contributions of religion in conflict, but those in particular to peacemaking and peacebuilding processes are less known, or maybe misunderstood, if not entirely neglected. Religion is a powerful constituent of cultural norms and values. It addresses the most profound existential issues of human life such as freedom and inevitability, fear and faith, security and insecurity, right and wrong, and the sacred and profane. Religion is deeply implicated in individual and social conceptions of peace. In other words, religion can underwrite both conflict and peace on its own terms. It is an intervening variable that sometimes escalates, sometimes de-escalates conflict behavior. It is a known fact that war and violence have often been undertaken historically, as well as at present, in the name of religion, yet religions profess to want peace. The potential of religion in positively transforming conflicts has been realized in a number of cases. In this essay the writer contests the claim that religion predominantly fosters violence, and argues that it should also be seen as a contributor to more peaceful social environments as religiously-motivated peace builders have played important roles in addressing many conflicts around the world.

This paper serves to systematically interrogate the role of religion in the peace process and the contribution that religious actors can make to peacemaking. The first part of the essay will take a peek at the nexus of religion, conflict and peacebuilding, as a means to delve into the true character of the role of religion in conflicts and peacemaking. Since this paper seeks to

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deliberate on the subject at hand vis-à-vis the case study of India, the writer, in the second segment, shall flick through a brief background of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. The gist of the discourse lies in the last part of the essay which seeks to tease out how the success of nonviolence is dependent on its foundation which is religion, thereby, bringing out the notion that religion does not only fuel conflicts but is also instrumental in bringing about peace.

Conceptual framework

Conflict resolution is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict. This essay shall be anchored upon the concept of conflict resolution propounded by Marc Gopin who asserts that conflict resolution systematically examines the decision making process of religious actors and leaders in order for strategies of peacemaking to be effective in the relevant context. The concept articulates that religion, through its leaders and tinkers, a commitment to the value of peace and religious actors playing an increasingly important and valuable role in resolving conflicts (Gopin: 1997). Believers integrate their spiritual tradition and peacemaking engaging in upholding laws and ideas that provide a cultural commitment to critical peace related values including empathy, openness and love to strangers, the suppression of unbridled ego and acquisitiveness, articulation of human rights, unilateral gesture of forgiveness and humanity, interpersonal repentance and the acceptance of responsibility for past errors as a means of reconciliation, and the drive for social justice. Gopin (1997) also says that the concept of conflict resolution can be thought to encompass the use of nonviolent resistance measures by conflicted parties in an attempt to promote effective resolution. Thus to say, religion plays an important role in conflict resolution through influencing

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values of peace and reconciliation as it has influenced religious leaders to adopt and spread the concept of nonviolence.

Nexus of religion, conflict and peacebuilding

Religious believers would normally regard their chosen religious expressions as both benevolent and inspiring, religious faiths are sometimes linked to violence and conflict both between and within religious groups. Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and as a result can adopt totalitarian characteristics. Referring to Brahm (2005) the monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) may have especial difficulty trying to distinguish between, on the one hand, claims of the absolutely divine and, on the other, the traditions and history of human existence. When claiming both absolute and exclusive validity, religious conviction can lead to intolerance, over-zealous proselytization and religious fragmentation. Religious exclusiveness may also be hostile to both pluralism and liberal democracy. Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence (Dubois: 2008). Added symbolic value can be an aspect of religious conviction, deriving from profane motivation and aims that become 'holy' objectives. Consequently, because of its tendency to color relationships, religion has become a major influence in politics, playing significant roles in the entire societal process especially in multi religious societies. It is realized that the high sentimental attachment to it by people of different culture and background makes it a politically active instrument in both national politics and the country's external relations which at times assume a destructive dimension. This situation obviously poses some threat to social, political and economic stability in the world.

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On the other hand, religion has also developed laws and ideas that have provided civilization with cultural commitments to critical peace-related values, including empathy, an openness to and even love for strangers, the suppression of unbridled ego and acquisitiveness, human rights, unilateral gestures of forgiveness and humility, interpersonal repentance and the acceptance of responsibility for past errors as a means of reconciliation, and the drive for social justice. The teachings and practices of major world religions reveal spiritual and moral formulations that support peace, social justice, reconciliation, and harmony within and between humanity and divinity. For all their differences, there is much that people of faith have in common, not the least of which, of course, is spirituality itself (Silberman: 2005). Therefore, one can argue that the recognition of a shared concern to develop honest, loving, and holistic relationships with God and neighbor can form the basis for the rebuilding of constructive relationships destroyed by violence. Individuals and faith-based organizations from a variety of religious traditions are increasingly active in attempts to end conflicts and to foster post-conflict reconciliation between warring parties in various parts of the world.

Brief background of Gandhi's Philosophy of nonviolence

Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi is one of the world's renowned peace leaders who molded the concept of nonviolence and inspired other leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Gene Sharp, and many others to adopt the concept. Weber & Burrowes (1990) define nonviolence as an umbrella term for describing a range of methods for dealing with conflict which share the common principle that physical violence against other people is not used. Nonviolent action is an

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expedient technique for dealing with conflict or bringing out social change, it's a moral imperative, a way of life. Nonviolent action is also a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence. Nonviolent action is not an attempt to avoid or ignore conflict. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively. Gandhi's legacy includes not just the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and a ground-breaking path of interreligious dialogue, but also boasts the first widespread application of nonviolence as the most powerful tool for positive social change. Referring to Shepard (2002) Gandhi's nonviolence was not just political: It was rooted and grounded in the spiritual, which is why he exploded not just onto India's political stage, but onto the world stage, and not just temporally, but for all times. This then brings forth a wider view on the effectiveness of religion in laying the stage for peaceful coexistence and automatically effective conflict transformation.

Moreover, for Gandhi, nonviolence was the word for a different a way of life based on love and compassion, values also rooted in religion. In Gandhi's terminology, Satyagraha was an outgrowth of nonviolence, one special form of nonviolent action which is Gandhi's version. Gandhi practiced two types of Satyagraha in his mass campaigns (Weber & Burrowes: 1990). The first was civil disobedience, which entailed breaking a law and courting arrest and was aimed at working a change of heart whether in the opponent or the public then it's easy to make sense of them. The second form of mass Satyagraha was noncooperation and it meant refusing to cooperate with the opponent, refusing to submit to the injustice being fought. It took such forms as strikes, economic boycotts, and tax refusals. Gandhi's followers had to cheerfully face

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beating, imprisonment, confiscation of their property and it was hoped that this willing suffering would cause a “change of heart.”

The real significance of the Indian freedom movement in Gandhi’s eyes was that it was waged nonviolently. He would have had no interest in it if the Indian National Congress had adopted Satyagraha and subscribed to nonviolence. He objected to violence not only because an unarmed people had little chance of success in an armed rebellion, but because he considered violence a clumsy weapon which created more problems than it solved, and left a trail of hatred and bitterness in which genuine reconciliation was almost impossible (Zuiderveen: 2001). Gandhi identified several characteristics of nonviolence and amongst them he emphasized that nonviolence is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater than and superior to brute force. In the last resort it does not avail to those who do not possess a living faith in the God of Love. Nonviolence affords the fullest protection to one's self-respect and sense of honor, but not always to possession of land or movable property, though its habitual practice does prove a better bulwark than the possession of armed men to defend them (Weber & Burrowes: 1990). Nonviolence, in the very nature of things, is of no assistance in the defense of ill-gotten gains and immoral acts. Nonviolence is a power which can be wielded equally by all children, young men and women or grown-up people, provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When nonviolence is accepted as the law of life, it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts.

Further elaborating on the background of nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi’s civil disobedience movement of 1930-1931 by itself failed to bring Indian independence; it seriously undermined British authority and united India’s population in a movement for independence under the

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leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC). It further signaled a new stage in the struggle for Indian swaraj (self-rule) and facilitated the downfall of the British Empire in India (Nanda: 2003). For a century and a half India was ruled by either the British East India Company, or the Royal Crown herself. The native people were subjected to the whims of British colonialism, which involved a strict system of monopolization to afford greater profits for the English. But around the turn of the century, the move toward Indian independence began to gather steam and the leader of this movement eventually came to be Mohandas Gandhi. Zuiderveen (2001) says that in India, Gandhi was welcomed as a Saint, as his efforts in South Africa had become famous back home. Though his non-violent acts of civil disobedience were very effective, the British often ended up being in the position of not wanting to punish him, as his imprisonment often caused far greater problems for them with angry natives. Several months after he got out of prison, he endured a three-week fast to protest violent outbreaks by militant Indians, to convince them of the way of non-violence, these efforts eventually led to the independence of India in 1947 (Zuiderveen: 2001). This then brings to light that nonviolence was powerful enough to change lives for the better lessening bloodshed in quest for freedom.

The religious aspect of nonviolence

Critics believe that Indians are particularly suited to nonviolent action, because of the ethic of nonviolence built into their religion. Mahatma Gandhi considered religion, spirituality, morality, and ethics, in fact, all activities of life, whether personal or public, to be integrated into the search for self-realization (Nanda: 2003). He did not see Buddhism as a new religion but, historically, as the most daring effort made to reform and revitalize the Hindu tradition of India.

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He saw it as the most revolutionary attempt to propagate the doctrine of ahimsa, or nonviolence, in its widest sense. His concept of Truth as God and ahimsa as a sense of identification with all creation, attained through self-purification, was in line with the teaching of Lord Buddha. Looking at crucial transformations in Indian politics it is evident that religious identity was particularly prone to politicization in India and religion played a central role in the nation's ideologies. This shows the peace building dimension of religion making a positive difference.

Moreover, elements of Gandhi's philosophy were rooted in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both of these advocate ahimsa (nonviolence), which is absence of the desire to kill or harm. The Acaranga Sutra, a Jainist text, describes the fundamental need for non-violence: 'All beings are fond of life; they like pleasure and hate pain, shun destruction and like to live, they long to live. To all, life is dear.' Ahimsa is a way of living and thinking which respects this deeply. Gandhi was both religious and open-minded, and saw the different religions as paths to the same goal (Shepard: 2002). He was inspired by the teachings of Jesus, in particular the emphasis on love for everyone, even one's enemies, and the need to strive for justice. He also took from Hinduism the importance of action in one's life, without concern for success. For Gandhi, ahimsa was the expression of the deepest love for all humans, including one's opponents; this non-violence therefore included not only a lack of physical harm to them, but also a lack of hatred or ill-will towards them. Nanda (2003) enunciates that Gandhi rejected the traditional dichotomy between one's own side and the "enemy;" he believed in the need to convince opponents of their injustice, not to punish them, and in this way one could win their friendship and one's own freedom. If need be, one might need to suffer or die in order that they

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may be converted to love. Here we see that instead of contributing to war religion, through nonviolence, is actually contribution to peaceful coexistence.

In addition, Gandhian nonviolence is based on religious principles drawn from a diversity of scriptures, particularly the Bhagavad Gita, the Bible, and the Koran. Both the Buddha and Christ had taught how to nonviolently resist what was wrong by direct action, taken with truth and love, against the arrogant priesthood, the hypocrites, and the Pharisees. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence seems to have been consciously inspired first by the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount and similar ideas were also found in Hindu scriptures (Nanda: 2003). Gandhi looked toward higher authority for absolute truth. His central concept, Satyagraha, translated both as "truth seeking" and "soul force," presupposed that the activist could learn from the opponent and vice versa. Truth could neither be achieved nor disseminated by force. Therefore, the concept of ahimsa was also key to the satyagrahi (the person engaged in truth seeking). Shepard (2002) sheds to light that while ahimsa is typically translated "nonviolence," it is not encumbered in the original transcript by the negative construction and connotation of the English word. The Indian independence movement lasted over a period of almost three decades, and involved thousands of Indians from all walks of life. Despite its size and duration, it remained almost uniformly nonviolent, even when law enforcement agents resorted to violence, even when protestors were beaten and or imprisoned, they themselves eschewed violence (Weber & Burrowes: 1990). Thus, in the process of bringing about peaceful conflict resolution, religion has also brought unity of purpose to peoples seeking the same goals.

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Religious leaders and workers have proven to be key actors in many efforts to resolve conflicts but this contribution is often overlooked because the secular media rarely pays attention to the role of religious peacemakers because their work is often not dramatic enough (Smoker & Groff: 1994). Therefore, besides the case of India and Gandhi, there have been other cases where religion has played a central role in conflict resolution through nonviolence. One of this century's most celebrated nonviolent activists has been Martin Luther King Jr. a pastor from Alabama. King found that Gandhi's teachings jelled with his own Christian beliefs specifically the biblical philosophy to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies", as well as his intolerance for racial injustice. He melded these ideas with the concept of nonviolent resistance. King became convinced that a philosophy based on love could succeed as a powerful and effective social force on a large scale and adopted the philosophy of nonviolent direct action (Silberman: 2005). King proclaimed that the nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but also refuses to hate him, at the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. Hence, regardless of one's religion, principles that point towards peace are cross cutting as different religions have been playing similar roles through nonviolence.

On the other hand, in virtually every heterogeneous society, religious difference serves as a source of potential conflict. Because individuals are often ignorant of other faiths, there is some potential tension but it does not necessarily mean conflict will result. Religion is not necessarily a cause of conflict but, as with ethnicity or race, religion serves, as a way to distinguish one's self and one's group from the other (Brahm: 2005). With religion a latent source of conflict, a triggering event can cause the conflict to escalate. At this stage in a conflict, grievances, goals, and methods often change in such a way so as to make the conflict more difficult to resolve. Dubois (2008) articulates that analysts often debate whether a war between or within religious

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groups is really religious or rather about something else like land, oil, ethnicity, or historical memories. It is often suggested that religion fuels conflict in two broad ways: first, religion shapes the identities and loyalties of warring, and, second, religion fuels conflict more directly by defining not only the identities and loyalties of communities, but also their very political goals. Nevertheless, this aspect should not be used to divert attention from religion's ability to resolve conflicts. While it may often be a source of conflict, it has an important role in the overall peace process.

Conclusion

Religion is often depicted as a trigger factor in many conflicts. Religion is also often being blamed as a tool to mobilise people during conflicts as intensive activism in the name of religion has been demonstrated in numerous historical and recent acts of violence, wars, and terrorism across the world. In many parts of the world people from different religions live in peace and coexist without any conflict. Religion is a double-edged sword that can both encourage and discourage world change, and can facilitate both violent and peaceful activism. Religious and spiritual leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, have tried to put this into practice

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